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F. H. BISSET

NUMBER FIVE

SOLO
SINGING

ERNEST NEWMAN



1920

ONE-SHEET SING

BOOKLETS

FESTIVAL

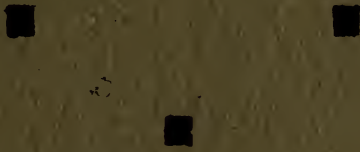
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Solo Singing

By
Ernest Newman

I do not propose, in this booklet, to discuss any of the problems of voice production. I shall assume that if you have not already mastered all these—especially those of breathing, of steadiness and purity of tone, and of variety of tone-colour—you are at any rate working at them, either with your singing teacher or alone.

And yet, though I am not going to discuss voice production, I must begin with some remarks on, and advice about, singing—not the singing of this song or that song, but just singing *qua* singing. For obviously, being able to *sing* is the necessary preliminary to being able to sing *expressively*, to “interpret.” The singing instrument is really not one instrument but two. There is the physical instrument and there is the mental instrument. Both are indispensable, but of the two the latter is, on the whole, the more important. We all know singers with good voices who do not stir more than the most languid interest in us, and other singers, with less good voices, to whom we could listen for hours. The former have voices but no musical intelligence, and in the long run, with intelligent listeners, it is the musical intelligence of the singer that counts. I do not mean that if you sing intelligently your voice does not matter ; we might as well say that so long as you know

how a Chopin Nocturne ought to go it does not matter if some of the notes of your piano do not sound, and the rest are all out of tune. There was a famous foreign vocalist of the last generation who was advertised on one of his American tours as "The Singer without a Voice." That, of course, is absurd. You cannot sing without a voice. The gentleman in question was supposed to be a great interpreter—so great an interpreter, indeed, that he could do without a voice. As a matter of fact, he was not a singer but a musical actor. He did wonders at times, for he was a thoughtful and cultured man ; but not such wonders as he would have been able to do had he had a good singing voice for his fine musical intelligence to work through.

Do not believe anyone, then, who tells you that you or he or anyone else can sing without a voice. You may, indeed, without a voice, "interpret" after a fashion ; but for the most part what you will be able to interpret is only the *words* of a song. In any song, however, the music, not the words, is the most important thing, as is proved by the fact that good music keeps many a poor poem in the land of the living, while the best of poems will not confer immortality on a bad setting of it. It is the *music* you must sing, and to do this you must know how to sing.

I would apologise for stating what seems the most obvious of truisms, were it not that, truism as it is, it needs to be insisted on, because it is so often overlooked. The percentage of professional singers who can sing is really quite small—although plenty of them have good voices. For "singing," in the sense

in which I am here using the term, means something more than making beautiful tone. It means, primarily, giving life and soul to a melody purely as a melody, regardless of the words.

If "interpretation" meant simply bringing out the meaning of the poem detail by detail, any of us, almost, could "interpret" a song. But if all that was needed was to bring out the meaning of the words, the musician would not have troubled to write his music. The music meant to him, and should mean to us, something more than the poem itself. The musician has enveloped the beauty of the poem in a still greater beauty; and it is this latter beauty, the beauty of the music purely and simply *as* music, that must be first brought out by the singer.

Assuming, then, that you have a voice and some idea how to "produce" it under varying breath-pressures and in different tone-colourings, the first thing to do is to learn how to use your voice *as a musical instrument pure and simple*. The ideal "singing" instrument, in some respects, is the violin. How does a Kreisler or an Ysaye move us in, say, a Mozart melody? Not by means of words, not wholly, even, by mere beauty of tone, but most of all by shading and phrasing. By his phrasing he makes the melody a series of lines, perfect first of all in their own drawing and then in their relation to each other; by his shading he makes the lines seem to breathe like living things—or, if you prefer to look at it in that way, he adds beauty of colour to their beauty of pure line. Our pleasure is a *musical*, not a poetic, pleasure.

Now what the violinist does is what the singer ought to aim at in the first place, long before he begins to

“interpret.” He must learn how to sing the music before he begins to sing the poem. Work then, first, at realising song—not merely this song or that song, but song *qua* song—as a manifestation of purely *musical* beauty and expressiveness. Cultivate this kind of musical perception unceasingly. Try, for a little time each day, to sing as if you were a wordless musical instrument. Take, for this purpose, a purely instrumental piece—something, if possible, that you have heard a great violinist or ’cellist or pianist play—and try to sing it (or such phrases of it as lie within your voice) as if you were just an instrument. Try to feel the beauty of a phrase *as* a phrase; try to see it as a whole and to draw the outline of it firmly and convincingly. Modulate the tones and the colours of your voice from note to note as a Kreisler or a Pachmann modulates the tones and colours of his violin or piano. It is best to choose an instrumental work at first, because you will be able to find better professional models in that field than, generally speaking, among the singers. If you cannot hear the great players in the flesh, study them on the gramophone: listen again and again, for instance, to Kreisler’s playing of Dvorak’s “Humoreske,” or his own “Caprice Viennoise,” or to Casals’ playing of the Bourrée from Bach’s unaccompanied ’cello suite in C major. Find out for yourself the secrets of this wonderful art of expression within the limits of pure music, unhelped by words. Pick out phrases that particularly take your fancy, and try to sing them as the player plays them, with the same firm yet elastic sweep of phrase, the same delicate modelling of the surface at this point and that.

Then pass on to some piece of vocal music in which the words hardly matter. A good many of the arias of Handel or of the 18th century Italian masters are excellent for this purpose. These men did not "paint" the words detail by detail, as most modern song writers do. They just took a few lines that expressed a generalised sentiment, and then settled down into the business of turning that sentiment into music, without troubling in the least about this word or that. The poem was merely an excuse for writing a piece of music that was to be sung, not played. The aria must therefore be *played*, as it were, upon the voice as upon an instrument—in the mood of melancholy, or pathos, or serenity, or whatever it may be, that is suggested by the poem. Take up one of these arias, and study it as a piece of pure music. The well-known "Ombra mai fù" will do excellently. This is from Handel's opera "Xerxes." The hero is standing under a great plane tree, and the words of his aria mean simply "Never was shade more grateful." Do not worry, then, about the words. Simply try to fill your mind with a sense of the grateful shade of the noble tree, and to express this in your voice alone, as if you were a human violin or 'cello. See the melody as the stately thing it is ; phrase it in long firm lines ; thrill to the beauty of it ; try to express this beauty in the modulation of your tones, as Casals would if he were playing it. There is nothing here to "interpret"—except the music. Even when, later, you begin to sing the aria with the words, do not suppose that these matter in the least, *as words*—especially in some nonsensical English translation of, or substitute for, them. The words are merely the means by which

the human instrument, as distinguished from the string or wind instrument, is enabled to function in the service of purely musical beauty.

Another excellent song—a more modern one—to practise in this way is Chabrier's exquisite "L'isle heureuse." I do not think there is an English translation, but do not let that deter you from getting the song and working at it. The words really do not matter in detail; that is to say, no line of the melody, no note in any line, is what and where it is merely because it has to illustrate or underline any particular word or words. The theme is simply "the happy isle." Think of any happy isle of your own heart's desire, and then just vocalise the melody as beautifully as you can—dreamily, tenderly, caressingly, trying to make it a living thing in terms of pure music alone.

I have devoted so much space—something like one-third of this booklet—to this one point because it is the most important of all. To repeat: before you can sing a song you must know how to *sing*—not merely how to make pleasant tones, but how to give its own peculiar life to a melodic and rhythmic line. Without this, no singing ever satisfies a musical hearer, no matter how good the voice may be; with it, a voice very much less than perfect can still give a musical hearer great pleasure. It is this, before everything else, that makes the singing of a Battistini or a Gerhardt the exquisite, satisfying, artistic thing it is.* If your singing has not at least something of

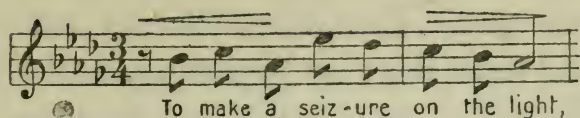
* I expressly refrain from mentioning any British singers so as not to seem to be making invidious distinctions between them. There are three or four, however, whom I might cite as models in this matter of pure line-drawing.

this virtue, the adjudicator may mark you highly for your voice, but you will come down on other scores : if you have a good deal of this virtue, it may count more with him, relatively, than mere voice.

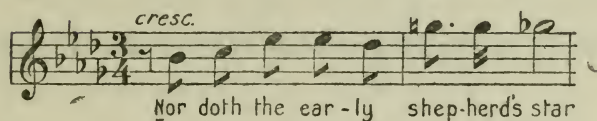
Even yet, after much practice, and still more thought, along this line, do not begin to pay much attention to the verbal element in song. There is still much to be done with music as music before you begin to think about it as the expression of words. Having studied the beauty of pure line, of modulation of tone, of colour of tone, within the phrase itself, study the way in which the phrases are built up by the composer into a whole, the relation of them to each other, the way they work up to their climax, and so on. Try to see a song as a piece of architecture. Find out what is its ground level, so to speak, and where and how much the bulk of it rises above this, and where the building rises to its greatest height (which is not necessarily, of course, on the highest note ; the moment of greatest intensity may be elsewhere ; it may even be in a *pause*, and then your problem will be to make that silence the most expressive thing in the whole work). Space forbids my going much into detail on this point of architecture : it is a thing you must study for yourself, taking care to study none but the best models. I will give just one illustration to suggest some of the lines on which you might work.

Whether you are a soprano, a contralto, a tenor, or a bass, get for this purpose Roger Quilter's beautiful song, " To Daisies." I have heard it sung by hundreds of competitors, but rarely satisfactorily. Nearly everyone, to begin with, sings it too loudly, though the

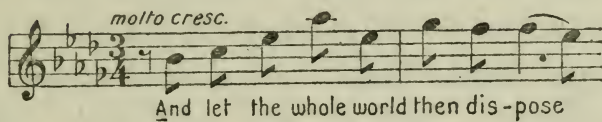
This is the third line of the first stanza : let us call it *A* :—



This is the third line of the second stanza (*B*) :—



This is the third line of the third stanza (*C*) :—



You will see that *A* brings the melody gently down below the general pitch-level of No. 1 ; and that, in fact, this first stanza ends (in the fourth line, not quoted here) much lower than it began. The second stanza, by means of No. 1, brings us again to where we were before *A* struck in : but this time the composer takes us, with *B*, soaring up not only above No. 1, but above *A*. You feel, however, something in the harmonies that tells you this is not the end : the harmonies seem to pull the melody down from its topmost height to the plain again : as a matter of fact, this second stanza actually finishes up on a lower note than the first did. Plainly this is not the real climax ; it is only a preliminary trial of the wings before the real flight into the blue is made. The real climax comes with *C*. Here not only does the melody

touch the highest note of the whole song, but there is something about the phrase that makes you feel that it is the point towards which the composer has been working from the very beginning, that it is strong enough to bear his whole weight for the time he wants it to do so, and that the succeeding final quiet phrase is not a fall but an easy, assured, controlled descent—and that not to the ground level from which the song began, but to a resting-place somewhat higher up.

I have chosen an English song for my illustration not only because this happens to be one of the loveliest songs I know, but because, it being English, you can see the significant words coming on the notes for which the composer meant them, not shifted about absurdly in a translation. And if you will look again, you will see how admirably the words and the notes in the climax help each other and you. Herrick's three stanzas have been steadily leading up to the last two lines of his poem. The flowers are not to shut till Julia has closed her eyes: *then*, not the flowers only, but the whole world, can "dispose itself to live and die." Note how perfectly the strongest verbal emphases coincide with the strongest melodic emphases in *C*—at "whole," "then," and "dispose"; not only does the building throw up its spire at the right place, but the highest point of the spire is picked out in a high light.

The best way, then, to do everything that is needed with the song is, in a sense, to do as little as possible with it. The composer has done it for you: all you have to do is to follow his architectural principles.

Throw out a little above the rest the three salient lines of the melody—*A*, *B*, and *C*; *A* very slightly, *B* a little more, and *C* still a little more. But never too much, even in *C*. For one thing, in *C* you have the high notes themselves making an effect of emphasis for you; for another thing, the poem also obviously reaches its climax in the words to which *C* is set. There is no need for loud singing or forced emphasis anywhere. It is a matter of *proportions*, not of size. Four is as truly twice two, and eight is as truly twice four, as four hundred is twice two hundred and eight hundred twice four hundred. If you have established the right tone, the right colour, the right mood in stanza 1, very slight increases of power in stanzas 2 and 3 will give the effect first of doubling, then of quadrupling the original power. And so you will both bring out the architectural design of the melody and keep the song throughout in the right key of delicacy; the violet will remain a violet.

I am able in this booklet to discuss in detail the architecture only of one song. Try to apply the same principles of study to everything you have to sing. But remember that the methods of musical architecture are almost infinite. Every good piece of music has its main lines and its secondary lines of structure, its varying levels, its points of climax and of repose, and so on; but all these are differently planned and combined in different works. You must discover them for yourself in each. Do this part of your study away from the piano, away even from your voice. Do it on your walks. Try to project the song outside yourself, to see it as something existing in space, like a building, to see lines stretching in this direction

and that, story rising on story till that highest point is reached towards which all the lines have been tending from the ground upwards, and from which they then lead down again. Cultivate the sense of musical design. And do it, as I have said, silently. When you are singing, you are probably too much occupied with problems of tone and with details of expression to see the song as a whole.

To summarise : learn first of all the beauty, the meaning, of musical line purely as line, then how these lines are built up into a piece of musical architecture. In some songs, this (apart from tone) is almost all that matters : the words are only the means by which the melody is adapted to the human instrument instead of to an instrument of wood or metal. Absorb the song thoroughly into your tissues by frequently pondering upon it in silence. When once this has been done, it will of itself declare its right tempo to you. If it is a work of considerable technical difficulty, such as a florid aria of Bach's, seek out the passage of greatest difficulty, and then work backwards and forwards from this. The Bach aria may begin with some easy phrases ; but later there comes an awkward passage of rapid semi-quavers. Your initial tempo may be the right one ; but if you have to slow down when you come to the knotty point your whole tempo-scheme is broken up ; either you resume the proper tempo when the difficulty is over (thus revealing the fact that it *has* been a difficulty for you !) or you adapt the tempo of the remainder to this slower bit, and so throw the second portion of the aria out of focus with the first. *Begin* your tempo-planning with the difficult passage. Find out at what rate you can take this

comfortably : then work out the opening tempo to scale. If this proves to be too slow for the feeling of the music, you will recognise that you have to brush up your technique and get the difficult passage going easily ; but in any case you will have got your *proportions* right, and that is a great thing. Remember that music is sculptured sound, or architecture in sound ; it must make on the ear the same impression of design, of proportion, that a fine statue or a fine building does.

Even when words come seriously into the question, the all-important thing is still the purely musical effect—the beauty of the lines, the strength and harmony of the design, the expressiveness of the music purely as music. If these are wrong, no amount of insistence on the words will make your performance right. But if these are right, the right handling of the words can make them seem even more right. That is, of course, when the words matter in detail. Sometimes, as we have seen in the Handel case, they do not, their sole functions being (*a*) to give the singer something more varied than “ Ah ” to sing, (*b*) to define for him the general mood of the music, and so help him to tune his instrument to the key of pathos, or majesty, or raillery, or gloom, or brightness, etc., etc.

But in many modern songs an individual line or individual word may be of importance, so you must find out which these are, and give them their due colour or due emphasis—but no more. Do not insist on a word so that it seems to stand out through the enveloping tissue of the music like the ribs of a bony horse showing through his skin. You know that a

horse of that kind has something wrong with him : you may be equally sure that a musical phrase in which you are conscious of a word at the expense of the melody has something wrong with it. It is a law of good structure that the scaffolding shall not be seen. It is implied in the completed building, but not visible. The flesh of the body is held together, and its outlines defined, by the skeleton ; but the bones do not—or ought not to—show through the flesh. We must be made conscious of the striking-in of an important word, but not too conscious of it. The effect must be got *within* the melodic flow, not outside it and at the expense of it. As a matter of fact, you will find in the majority of cases that the composer (if he knows his business) has given the salient word to a salient note or a salient harmony : it is already provided for, and the slightest little more-than-necessary insistence on it will make much too much of it. In no case stress it in such a way as to make the hearer conscious of it at the expense of the *music*.

Be particularly wary of emphasising a particular word if you are singing a translation ; the chances are a thousand to one that the original is quite different at that point, and that you are making the composer seem to be doing something he never dreamed of doing. Sometimes the translator can hardly go wrong : when you make the most of “ And ah, his kiss ! ” in Schubert’s “ Gretchen at the Spinning-Wheel,” you are really singing the exact English equivalent of Goethe’s “ Und ach, sein Kuss ! ” But instances of correspondence so exact as this are very rare in translations. Take it as a general rule to be suspicious of translations. Sing the song *as a whole*, with as little insistence on

individual words as possible—unless you know the song in the original and *know* that the right word has come in the right place, or unless your instinct tells you that it has done so. If the music of a song is so intimately connected with the poem that the one is almost inconceivable without the other, make the poem part of yourself by frequent reflection upon it. Try to get inside the skin of the character who speaks in it, to realise the scene in which it is set, to react to whatever happens to the character as you would if it were to happen to you. If you are thoroughly inside the poem and the music imaginatively, the proper vocal colour from moment to moment will come of itself (within, of course, your technical powers). When I say gently to someone I like “Do this to please me,” and roughly to someone I dislike, “Get out, you pig,” my voice takes on a different timbre in the two cases, not because I consciously apply any principles of “production” to it, but because my mental state reacts unconsciously on my organs of tone. So it is in singing. Feel your song thoroughly, and your imagination will so dispose of your larynx and your mouth as to get something of the right tone-colour into your voice.

Study a good many more songs than the one or two you hope to sing in public. The more generally musical you make yourself, the more musical will your singing of any one song be: the whole man sings. The more you know of the other work of the composer of your present song, the better you will sing that song; for you will have acquired a knowledge of his general musical physiognomy (every composer has his own), and the fulness of that knowledge will

unconsciously be poured out upon the song of his you happen to be singing. For the same reason, make the acquaintance of as many composers as possible, and try to get to the secret of the style of each ; for every composer has his own style, and the method of singing that may be right for one may be wrong for another ; you cannot, to give an extreme illustration, sing Debussy like Brahms. Try to discover what it is in each composer's music that makes it seem to wear a face of its own. Notice, for example, Handel's love for smooth progressions, and try to phrase his noble melodies with the easy breadth they demand. Notice how Debussy will subtly change his harmony at a critical point in the poem, and try to modulate and colour your voice at that point so as to make it seem to melt into the expressive piano chord. You must not sing Bach's muscular, brawny phrases as you would the delicate phrases of Mozart.

In typically Italian music, follow the old-established conventions of the Italian style of singing. Sometimes the way of phrasing may seem wrong to you ; but it is always done with an object—the object of letting the singer show off his art—and you must follow it faithfully. Look, for instance, at this passage from Verdi's " Celeste Aida " :—

mi - sti - co rag - gio di lu - cee fior
ra - di - ant flow - er, bloom - ing - and bright

Our British impulse is to view the phrase as ending in the second bar ; the words and the melody both indicate a breath-pause here. But Verdi's marking shows

that he wants you to carry the phrase on to the first note of bar 3, so as to get the full effect of the *crescendo* and the sudden *diminuendo*, without interrupting the flow of tone. The same principle is seen at work a little later—

del mio . pen - sie - ro tu sei re - gi - na
 queen - ly thou reign - est o'er me trans - cen - dent.

Note the tying of bars 2 and 3, seemingly against the natural lilt of both words and melody.

In a word, get to know all you can about not only the song you have to sing, but about songs in general, styles in general, composers in general. If your test piece is taken from an opera, learn what you can about the opera as a whole, so that you may be able to get into the skin of the character you are supposed to be representing.

I need hardly say anything as to the importance of good diction: you know it as well as I do; but that is a matter for yourself and your singing teacher rather than for an outside adviser.

In conclusion, be simple, unaffected, and sincere when you are singing. Give yourself wholly up to the song and the composer: regard yourself merely as the wire through which they transmit their message to your hearers. Do not think how you can score "points"; you will impress the adjudicator the more the less you try to impress him. Learn all you can from other singers of the same song, either in person or on the gramophone; but never be afraid to see it through

your own eyes, never adopt any reading slavishly. There may be fifty right ways of singing the same song ; but what is right for one singer may not be right for another with a different vocal equipment and a different mentality. An adjudicator will never disqualify you for a reading that is purely your own, so long as it strikes him as one genuinely felt. You must allow him to believe, as a result of his long experience, that certain ways of dealing with the song are wrong : but of the ways of dealing with it rightly there will be many, and if yours is one of them, depend upon it it will strike a responsive chord in the artist and the human being in him. But never try to *make* a reading. Let it make itself, let it take shape insensibly in you as the result of your giving yourself up whole-heartedly to the song and its creator.

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To Thee, O Lord, our hearts
we raise, | An Wasserflüssen Babylon.
Ermuntre dich. |
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Brightest and Best | Hilf, Herr Jesu, lass gelingen.
Liebster Immanuel. |
| 4 Through the day Thy love has
spared us (Vesper Hymn).
O Sacred Head, | Welt, ade! ich bin dein müde.
Passion Chorale. |
| 5 Jesus lives!
Holy, Holy! | Meinen Jesum lass ich nicht.
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